

Jennifer (Jen) Mueller
My Conservation Story

My journey in conservation began as a young child on the dairy farms in upstate New York, in the small rural town of Volney. Volney is a small town, it is very rare to even find it on a map but it is not located far from Lake Ontario that host a number of nuclear power plants. Within that town existed the Silk Road Landfill, about 4 miles from my home – the landfill was a Superfund Site with over 8000 barrels of toxic waste buried within it. Supposedly, the dumping of toxic waste at this site was no longer allowed but one night, in the late 1970's, my mom and her friends saw headlights going into the landfill in the middle of the night. They thought this was odd and decided to investigate what was going on. They took a video camera out in the woods and witnessed the illegal dumping of barrels of asbestos in an unsecured landfill. Volney is a town where its water sources comes from ground water for wells and farm land. Besides the illegal dumping taking place at the Silk Road Landfill, the county was in the process of building another landfill 3 miles away from this Superfund Site (about 1 mile from my house) behind a historical church on prime farmland, where a major aquifer that provided over 500,000 gallons of water a day was located. In an effort to stop the construction of another landfill in our small town, my mom, who was a house wife, along with her friends who were also housewives, began their own environmental organization called S.T.O.P (Survival for Tomorrow Observation Program).

In a few short weeks the STOP ladies delivered over 500 signed letters to the DEC (Department of Environmental Conservation) in New York to get a public hearing on the proposed new landfill. This grassroots effort turned into a three-year effort that grew to get recognition from Lois Gibbs of Love Canal and the Citizen's Clearing House for Hazardous Waste. My mom and her friends were awarded and were invited to the First National Grassroots Convention which was held in DC. They were given an award for their outstanding efforts by Ralph Nader and Dr. Paul Connet of St. Lawrence University. They organized protests with local farmers at sites and met with heads of industry to explain their concerns for protecting the land, water, and air. They had a well-attended fundraiser in Volney called "For the Love of Our Land Dance" that raised enough money to fund a lawsuit at the Appellate Court of New York.

Although the STOP organization didn't succeed in officially stopping the landfill from construction, they were able to make it a more secure landfill with a lining to protect seepage of waste into area wells and streams. It was actually named as one of the most state-of-the-art landfills ever built according to the EPA, if that is even logical according to my mom.

Growing up in a house with an Environmental Activist, I was involved with mom, friends, and neighbors learning and living the meaning of grassroots efforts. At a young age I experienced sitting at the dinner table listening to conversations of protecting the land we lived on and the work that needed to be done which ranged from stuffing numerous letters to protesting with the farmers on their land to building floats representing STOP in the town parade. I remember being in awe having Lois Gibbs as a house guest and hearing her stories and learning how to organize strategies regarding this issue and working with government officials. My mom attended numerous events, including meetings with the Governor of New York and she always brought my sister and myself with her to as many events as possible. I learned how to work with the bureaucrats at a young age and it has been my passage ever since to carry on this work I am so passionate about that was instilled in me by these amazing women. To this day the famers in our community were STOPs largest support group and still thank my mom for all of her and STOP's efforts.

Volney will always hold a special place in my heart, not only was it my childhood home, but it taught me the value of conservation and fighting the good fight. It is also the location where I saw my first wolf in the wild – just one lone wolf in the summer when I was 10 years old. Volney does not have wolves or moose, but for some reason, that summer, both creatures decided to spend a short visit before moving on. I found my new passion and another conservation story – the wolf and the landscapes they call home.